



Powered by Clickability

Parties take Social Security debate on tour

By Andrea Stone and Judy Keen, USA TODAY

WASHINGTON — The reception for 35 conservative House Republicans at Vice President Cheney's Victorian mansion last week was an informal affair.



President Bush pushes for his Social Security reforms during a town-hall style meeting at Notre Dame University.

J. Scott Applewhite, AP

Members of Congress nibbled on mini-cheeseburgers and sipped wine or Diet Cokes as Cheney mingled. Some clutched copies of Lynne Cheney's children's books they had brought to be autographed.

Robert Aderholt of Alabama asked the vice president to write a birthday note for his 1-year-old son. Kevin Brady of Texas stepped into the solarium to type an e-mail on his BlackBerry to his mother in South Dakota. "Mom," he wrote, "guess where I am!"

Brady's mother, who is in her 70s, might have been more interested in *why* he was there: to talk about overhauling Social Security. That Cheney felt compelled to invite some of the administration's staunchest followers in for a pep talk is testament to President Bush's no-stone-unturned strategy, as well as a fear that support for revamping the program isn't as solid as he'd like.

Even before the administration announced a 60-day, 60-stop promotion tour Wednesday, a steady stream of lawmakers had accepted invitations to discuss Social Security with Bush at the White House, aboard Air Force One and in the presidential limousine. For now, the dialogue is more conversation than conversion, with most discussions centering on the need to fix Social Security rather than on how to do it.

The campaigning on Capitol Hill and beyond is "certainly as intense as anything I've ever been involved in," says Rep. Jim McCrery, R-La., who heads the House subcommittee on Social Security.

President Bush kicked off the effort in his State of the Union address last month, but the pressure was turned up soon afterward during a Republican retreat at the Greenbrier resort in White Sulphur Springs, W.Va. There, political adviser Karl Rove told members of Congress that Social Security was Bush's No. 1 domestic priority.

Since then, Senate and House Republicans have formed groups to spread the message that the program is in trouble. Scores of members have held town hall meetings in their districts and more are planned.

"The Republican Conference is encouraging all members to talk to and hear from our constituents on these issues, especially in these early stages as we start to put together the bill," House Majority Leader Tom DeLay, R-Texas, said last week. Although 70 House Republicans have hosted more than 250 meetings, DeLay said that was "not

enough." He's urging members to hold more sessions when Congress breaks for Easter later this month.

The president's party is playing a major role. Republican National Committee staffers participate with White House, Treasury and congressional staff in conference calls to plan strategy and daily talking points. The RNC and advocacy groups such as Progress for America monitor news reports and lawmakers' public statements as part of a rapid-response operation.

"When someone from MoveOn is talking to a camera, we're working to make sure that supporters of the president's proposals are right there too," RNC spokesman Brian Jones says, referring to the liberal advocacy group, MoveOn.org, which opposes Bush's proposal.

Democrats in Congress are united against diverting part of payroll taxes to private accounts. Last week, 41 Democratic senators and Vermont independent Jim Jeffords sent a letter to Bush saying so. The White House downplays such actions, including a "Fix It, Don't Nix It Tour" over the weekend by Democrats. The administration has quietly approached more than 15 Senate Democrats.

One of them is Nebraska's Ben Nelson, one of three Democrats who did not sign the letter (North Dakota's Kent Conrad and Wisconsin's Russ Feingold were the others). He has ridden in Bush's limousine, had lunch with Treasury Secretary John Snow and expects a visit this week from Allan Hubbard, Bush's chief economic adviser. But the centrist Democrat says he's under no illusions that cooperation on Social Security will stave off a GOP challenger when he runs for re-election next year. "The White House policy folks work with me, while the White House political operatives work *on* me," he says.

He's not the only one being worked on. Bush surrogates are fanning out to attend Social Security rallies and town halls across the country, call radio talk shows and write letters to newspapers. Rosario Marin, the Mexican-born U.S. treasurer during Bush's first term, talks up private accounts to Spanish-language media. Texas A&M economist Thomas Saving spoke last week in favor of the president's plan at the University of Nevada-Las Vegas, in the home state of Senate Democratic leader Harry Reid.

The president's supporters are even signing up young — very young — future Social Security recipients. Progress for America, which plans to spend \$20 million on Social Security campaigning this year, is sending 9-year-old Noah McCullough out to tout Bush's plan. A self-described Republican from Katy, Texas, with an encyclopedic knowledge of presidential history, McCullough has appeared on *The Tonight Show* and can brag he beat Democratic Party Chairman Howard Dean in a trivia contest.

"I have learned to never underestimate the persuasive powers of George W. Bush," said Indiana Rep. Mike Pence, leader of the House GOP conservatives. "We've not yet begun to fight."

▪ [REPRINTS & PERMISSIONS](#)

Find this article at:

http://www.usatoday.com/news/washington/2005-03-06-social-security-tour_x.htm

Check the box to include the list of links referenced in the article.

